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Can ecotourism deliver real economic, social, and environmental benefits? A study of the Osa Peninsula, Costa Rica

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Abstract

Doubt persists about ecotourism's ability to make tangible contributions to conservation and deliver benefits for host communities. This work in Costa Rica's Osa Peninsula tests the hypothesis that ecotourism in this region is more effective at improving well-being for local residents, at enhancing their access to key resources and information, and at supporting biodiversity conservation than other locally available economic sectors. Data from 128 semi-structured interviews with local workers, both in ecotourism and in other occupations, together with associated research, indicate that ecotourism offers the best currently available employment opportunities, double the earnings of other livelihoods, and other linked benefits. Locally, ecotourism is viewed as the activity contributing most to improvements in residents' quality of life in the Osa Peninsula and to increased levels of financial and attitudinal support for parks and

environmental conservation. Ecolodge ownership by local people is substantial, and many local ecotourism workers plan to launch their own businesses. The data offer a convincing rebuttal to arguments that ecotourism does little to address poverty or disparities in access to resources and equally rebuts claims that ecotourism is simply a part of the “neoliberal conservation toolkit” that cannot help but exacerbate the very inequalities it purports to address.

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128 “

Keywords:

ecotourism community development conservation tourism impacts Costa Rica Osa Peninsula

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All authors share an interest in the use of tourism to stimulate biodiversity conservation and alleviate poverty in Latin America.

Additional information

Notes on contributors

Carter A. Hunt

Carter A. Hunt is an assistant professor of recreation, park and tourism management at the Pennsylvania State University. At the time of this research, he was a postdoctoral scholar in the Department of Anthropology at Stanford University.

William H. Durham

William H. Durham is the Bing Professor in Human Biology, a Yang and Yamazaki University Fellow, and has been a member of the Stanford Anthropology faculty since 1977. He is also the co-director of the Center for Responsible Travel (CREST).

Laura Driscoll

Laura Driscoll, MA, was the CREST Stanford Coordinator at the time of the research and is currently pursuing doctoral studies in the Department of Environmental Science, Policy, and Management at the University of California, Berkeley.

Martha Honey, PhD, is the co-founder and co-director of the Center for Responsible Travel (CREST), and was an executive director of The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) from 2003 to 2006.

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